



NEW WOMAN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SMALL REMEDIES: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism into the twentieth century. The New Woman was a result of the growing respectability of postsecondary education and employment for women who belonged to the privileged upper classes of society. To explore this contention this present paper tries to analyze the characters in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) as an image of new woman who rebels a new position of freedom and choice when it came to marital and sexual partners. These characters can give away everything for the things that they urge like Savitribai for instance gave away her lover and denies her own daughter for her craves for music. The characters are all educated, talented and intelligent. It is evident that they don't really bother about what the society thinks.

KEYWORDS: New woman, feminism, freedom, choice, education.

INTRODUCTION:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent voices to arrive on the scene of Indian literature in English. She has, nevertheless, created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. Her novels portray the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian woman and also analyze how their lot has not changed much even in the twentieth century. Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of Indian middle-class educated women, who though financially independent, are confronting the dilemma of existence a phenomenon that shows itself.

Small Remedies (2000) is the story of Madhu, a lonely daughter, a sensitive and capable woman, a very vulnerable wife and mother. Madhu, faced with the terrible vacuum caused by the death of Adit, her only son, sets out on a long and lonely journey in her attempt to come to terms with her loss. Her healing process starts when she is confronted with the lives of two other women, both brave in their own ways. One is Savitribai Indorekar, a star singer of the Gwalior gharana, a singer who wrote headlines not only through her music but also through the way she lived her life. The other one is Leela, Madhu's aunt, with whom she had spent her youth and adulthood. Savitribai Indorekar is the ageing doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and a home to pursue her musical genius. She has led the most unconventional of lives, and undergoes great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practices double standards — one for men and the other for women. Even as a child she was a victim of gross gender discrimination.

In *Small Remedies*, the concept of freedom is worked out differently even when the fears may be similar. Freedom is seen in terms of a recognition of sexuality, working out the areas of privacy, resisting the imposition of stereotypical traditional roles, especially that of mother.

At the very beginning of the novel, one finds that it is the story of a bereaved mother about the death of her only son but as the story progresses the reader learns, more than death, it is the silence, the total non-communication on Adit's part during the three days preceding his death which continues to bother her. It is this silence which makes her guilty. She was not ready to let go, she had held on to him, and thus this silence is a defiance of her rights as a mother. Perhaps why Adit left home is may be because of the rising tension between his parents. All this was running inside Madhu's mind. The tension was because of the pre-marital relationship of Madhu with Dalvi. Madhu's knowledge of sex before marriage has upset her husband Som and leads to strained relationships. The fact of her pre-marital encounter with Dalvi shatters his illusion of total possession of her. This is a loss of the romantic ideal of virgin womanhood, and it results in the tension at home. Madhu withdraws into a cocoon when she loses Adit; all communication is snapped. This withdrawal is an act of rebellion, an act of courage, mourning, a self punishment, a revenge on others, a sense of guilt and self-reproachment. With the suggestion of her friend, Madhu works on writing the autobiography of Savitribai Indonekar, a classical singer, who abandons her family, her child and finally even her lover in order to pursue her career. In talking to Savitribai, she hopes to forget her despair and anguish, her grief and pain after her son's death. She knew Savitribai in her childhood, as a great musician who had moved into the house next door, with her lover and tabla accompanist Ghulam Saab, and their only daughter, Munni. Savitribai, who is a daughter-in-law from a respected and conservative brahmin family, had given up her sophisticated life

which was full with numerous tradition and barriers as of a Brahmin family to learn her lifelong dream: music, and to devote herself to this art. The rebellion of Savitribai through her abandonment of her Brahmin life can also be compared with that of the protagonist in R.K. Narayan's famous novel *The Guide*. Walking out of a marriage of her own choice, Rosie, the protagonist develops into a full-fledged dancer with the help of Raju, the guide. Narayan has portrayed her as a woman with superwoman qualities and at that stage Raju says: "She needs no man; neither Marco nor I had any place into her life, which had its own sustaining quality she does not understand" (199) As Rosie brushes aside Raju when she attains her position as a good dancer, in the same way, Savitribai too moves ahead and becomes a famous classical singer leaving Ghulam Saab far behind. She is seen as a woman who is very focus towards her aim and can leave behind everything.

New woman in *Small Remedies*:

The very kind of woman portrayed in the novel is that of a 'new woman'. They are the feminist who will not seat still to be marginalized and cried out their miserable condition but they are seen as rebelling against the norms of society. They are not conforming to the norms of society that are being projected. And whether it is Rosie, Savitribai or Leela (Madhu's Aunt) all have been rejected by society as they were bold enough to make a self-defined path for their own selves. A woman in India has always been considered as a 'subjugated tamed female' and when this ideology is broken, she is given the tag of 'rebel'. In this context, Malati Mathur writes:

It is ironic that men who have chosen to give up family and a secure lifestyle in pursuit of an idea or dream are not only accepted but also honoured. Siddhartha and Mahavira did just this and are venerated today as the founders of Buddhism and Jainism respectively as is Goswami Tulsidas who wrote the immensely popular Hindi version of the Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*. But a woman who boldly chooses to step over the threshold is marked for life and has to struggle to maintain her dignity and a measure of 'respectability'. (86)

The same thing can be discerned in the case of Savitribai where she leaves behind her family, child and everything 'respectable' in the pursuit of her ambition to emerge as a prominent classical singer. At the initial level she does takes the help of Ghulam Saab, the tabla player, but as she proceeds, she gives up her lover too and devotes herself to music. Savitribai takes up the challenges that life throws her way, one after another and deals with them successfully. With a single mindedness of purpose, she asserts her own self and is self-reliant and self-sufficient. This quality is visible even to the publisher who asks Madhu to take interviews and remarks: 'Her life is like a novel....' (19). When Madhu meets her for her interview sessions, Savitribai is authoritative, businesslike, knowing exactly what she wants. She reminisces about her childhood experiences and tells her that the traditional environment in her house gave her a setback when at an early age she showed her interest in music. She is snubbed by her father and grandmother who had the view that girls of 'respectable' families should not sing. Later the little girl grows up and sets her foot firmly on that path for the attainment of her dream. She rebels against the age-old traditions, deserts her family, society and everything in order to pursue her career. She elopes with the tabla accompanist Ghulam Saab and has a daughter Munni, out of the union.

Munni's rejection of the name given to her by her parents, and calls herself Meenakshi, is just symptomatic of her rejection of the life led by her parents, and her yearning for respectability. Munni can also be seen as rebelling to the confor-

mation that her parents choose to put in front of her. Madhu and Munni become friends. Munni enchants and rules Madhu. Later Munni succeeds in breaking the umbilical cord, and returns to her grand parents' family, and finally gets a new identity. Much later when Madhu meets Munni in Bombay, in a bus, Munni does not want to recognise her, and does not want to be recognised as Munni. She had obviously tried to make a sterile and clean break from her past. Madhu is perplexed when she is confronted with the fact that it was not just the daughter who denies the mother, the mother too has forgotten about her only daughter, at least, apparently. The disparity between the duo mother and daughter's way of life is so much a trait of a new woman. But spite of their growing rebellions of the both counterparts lead to their own sacrifices, they are made to pay a price for it; the end of mother daughter relationship. But inspite of the fact that Munni disowns her, Savitribai does not exhibit any signs of anger or defiance when asked about her. Listening to Bai, Madhu wonders how one can reject one's own child, or one's own mother, and realises that in this world everybody has to pay a price for everything.

The new women are bold, strong, determine and have the patience of paying a price for their doing. It's more like okay for them to pay the price. Ranjana Harish in her article on Kamala Das's 'My Story' says:

A woman has to pay a heavy price for being a woman; she must deny her real self, which might be that of a declared non-conformist in order to win back people's so called love and respect. She might have acquired a room of her own but it is still the society who decides with whom the room is to be shared. It will still take many more years for woman to be powerful enough to take such decisions herself. (221)

But here we find in Savitribai (Bai) the emergence of the new woman who takes decisions on her own, no matter what price she pays for her decisions. Bai's assertion of identity and individuality does not come without a price: 'Munni's rejection was the price Bai paid. Munni who yearned for the commonplace, the ordinary, and stifled everything that connected to her parents... Bai lost her daughter but her life moved on. Even today, sick, old, dying, childless, when everything seems to have ended for her, she's not wholly bereft.' (285) Bai glosses over all the inconvenient facts of her past life when she refuses to speak either about Gulam Saab or her daughter Munni, in her interviews to Madhu. Just as Munni obdurately refused to accept the fact that she was Ghulam Ali's daughter, so too does Bai go into denial: "There is no Munni, no illegitimate child, no abandoned husband, no lover. In showing me her album, she's presenting me with her own illusion of life. A life of success and achievement. Nothing lacking; no unreconciled child, no daughter...." (77-78)

To carve a space for herself that goes beyond the domestic utility, a woman has to be brave enough to give up what does not matter anymore. She needs to cross over the barriers that belittle her worth and maim her potential in the name of 'social respectability'. Savitribai, the gifted vocalist, is independent enough to cut through the familial mesh only to discover that the music guru she admires so much is no less patriarchal than the community she rejects. Hasina, Bai's disciple and the granddaughter of her lover Ghulam Ali, tells Madhu how difficult it is for a woman to gain a foothold in the profession without a male to organize and arrange things for her. Madhu remarks 'Women without men, I realized then, are totally different creatures.' (137) Hasina tells her how without Ghulam's help Bai would never have been able to rise as high as she eventually did. And then, one day he suddenly came back to the home, wife and family he had abandoned for Savitribai. When Madhu questions why his wife took him back the answer is:

'What choice did she have' (274) - a world of meaning, helplessness and a comment on the status of women, in that one sentence. Each session with Bai (as the great singer is called) triggers off Madhu's own memories, some of them connected with Munni, Bai's daughter by this Muslim partner who had been Madhu's playmate once; some entirely unconnected with Bai and to do with Madhu's own troubled life. Aware of the enormous power of words which can sculpt a life and congeal a person into a fixed image, Madhu is overwhelmed by her own omnipotence because she can create an infinite range of Savitribais: a great rebel who defies the conventions of her time; the feminist who lived her life on her own terms. Madhu's own story is incomplete without the presence of the other powerful character, Leela. Leela is a believer in Communism and leads an unconventional life as a widow who remarries a Catholic widower with children. She defies the traditional codes imposed by society and dares to re-marry the person of her choice, a person from a totally different community. She is 'the unusual aunt, the rebel in a wholly conventional, tradition-bound family' (44). She works as an active member of the party, fights for the rights of the mill workers and finally rises above all by devoting her life to the lives of the forgotten children of destiny- the poor, illiterate, underpaid and over-looked factory laborers. Leela was an unusual woman, ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well: 'But there was Leela, part of a generation even before mine. She always supported herself. When her first husband Vasant, died, she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law. Even after marrying Joe, a doctor with a fairly good income, she continued to live on her own money. And after Joe died, she moved back into her Maruti Chawl home the very next day, the place where she began her married life at the age of fifteen' (94). Her rebellion is thus a constructive one where she has crossed over the threshold, that too in a very dignified manner. But like Bai she too has to pay the price for the freedom she attained. The price she

had to pay was the rejection by Paula, her stepdaughter, who does not acknowledge her. But these factors do not affect either Bai or Leela, and neither of them ever complains about it as they seem to be well aware of the functioning of the world where anything a woman does independently is not easily accepted. Munni's rebellion in the novel is entirely different from her mother's and Leela's. Munni, the daughter of Savitribai, professed to hate music. Ruthlessly discarded by Savitribai in her subsequent climb to respectability, this girl is the most vivid character in the novel. As a neighbour and companion she had once cast a brief, but strong, spell on the child Madhu and initiated her into adult secrets. Looking back, Madhu now sees Munni's unashamed lies as an attempt to make sense of her insecure existence. Munni longs for the life of safe conventionality that her mother abandoned. She neither acknowledges her mother nor her handsome father Ghulam Ali: 'Hasina, searching for something, found Munni's wedding card and knowing I would be interested, brought it to me. A showy red, frayed at the edges now, the letters in ornate gilt, almost undecipherable- a card like many others, but different in one thing: the bride was identified only by her father and grandfather. I thought there was something cruel about it, about the rejection of Bai, as a mother, this erasing of her from her daughter's life'. (283) In order to avenge her mother, she enters into the traditional and conventional set-up that was rejected by her mother. She is presented as a fat housewife who has reinvented herself, having changed even her name in order to 'fit in'. Her constant attempt as a child is to establish a separate identity distinct from the one associated with Ghulam Ali and Bai as she repeats over and over to the girls who torment her, 'My name is not Munni, my name is Meenakshi', which culminates in 'the one she claimed finally, successfully denying her old one. Shailaja Joshi- a long way from Munni, daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab' (77). Ironically, she is identified as the 'only daughter of Savitribai Idorekar' when she dies in a riot, the name that she had fought so long and hard against finally becomes part of her epitaph.

CONCLUSION:

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are strong. They refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role models laid down by society for women. But they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal.

Thus in *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande delineates the major women characters in their subversion of their traditional roles. We have glimpses of their shattered lives but they fight their own battles in different arena of the society. In their own way, they tried to establish their individuality instead of getting compromised to their principles. Savitribai, Madhu, Leela are the victims of the gross gender discrimination but their self realization helps in discovering their identity and 'self'. They went on with the dying desire towards their achievements facing the hardships while life threw upon them. They never looked back. Passing through the alienation, rebellion and aggression if necessary, they achieved their dream of being a 'new' woman. They have their own dreams and they learn how to realize those dreams despite social barriers.

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